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Food Safety
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Meat and Poultry
Hotline Staff

Making the Connection

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1996



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A Vital Part of USDA'S Consumer Education Efforts

The Hotline's one-millionth call came in mid-November 1996. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman said on that occasion, "Since its beginning in 1985, the Hotline has provided cooks across the country with help providing meals — safely — for their families. The Hotline's experts answer questions about food safety — how long to roast poultry, how to cook hamburgers, how to use a meat thermometer. The Hotline is a vital part of USDA's consumer food safety education efforts and this one-millionth call is a milestone that celebrates these efforts and honors the talented, dedicated staff."

Questions to the Hotline have changed over the years. Early on, calls were more general in nature and almost always related to food handling. Today, many questions concern food science, processing, and inspection. Callers are more familiar with specific foodborne bacteria and technology.

It was fitting that the millionth call came in November. Over the years, Thanksgiving holiday food preparation has sparked a vast number of food safety questions. During that month, as consumers face what is for many the biggest culinary task of the year, the Hotline receives about 20 percent of its annual calls.

The Hotline also contributed to two new services launched in 1996 by FSIS. The first of these was a site on the Internet's World Wide Web. Many publications developed by and about the Meat and Poultry Hotline are available at <http://www.usda.gov/fsis>. Hotline-developed consumer publications also became available through the FSIS Fast Fax, a fax-on-demand service (1-800-238-8281 or 202-690-3754).

Caller Questions and Concerns

A wide variety of issues, cutting across product lines, surfaced in the year's consumer calls. Subjects ranged from "mad cows" to germ-fighting cutting boards. These are some of the highlights.

Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSE's)

TSE's are chronic, degenerative diseases of the central nervous system that produce spongiform changes in the brains of humans or animals. While such diseases have long been noted in a number of species (e.g., scrapie in sheep), it is the bovine form—BSE or "mad cow disease"—that has alarmed consumers since it was first diagnosed in Great Britain in 1986. In 1996, the number of BSE calls to the Meat and Poultry

Hotline rose dramatically when health authorities in Great Britain identified a new variant of the human brain disorder Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD). Relying on current data and in the absence of any credible alternative, scientists linked the variant-CJD cases to exposure to BSE prior to 1989, when specified bovine tissues were excluded from the human food supply in Great Britain.

Nearly 600 BSE calls were recorded by the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1996, making BSE the year's top caller concern. Most of the calls came in late March and April and were prompted by television programs. People wanted to know if beef, domestic and imported, is safe to eat. Concern was profound among callers who had traveled to Great Britain or planned to do so. Interest extended to all beef products, dairy products, and beef by-products and to imports from Great Britain and its trading partners.

Inspection Reinvented—The Final Rule on Pathogen Reduction and HACCP

In July 1996, USDA issued new regulations that require meat and poultry establishments to implement Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) systems as a means of controlling their processes to prevent microbial contamination. In addition, both plants and USDA will be testing for bacteria in meat and poultry, to monitor how well the system works. FSIS is first establishing performance criteria and requiring routine testing by slaughter establishments for generic *E. coli* as a process control indicator for fecal contamination. Second, it is adopting pathogen reduction performance standards, which industry must meet, to reduce the nationwide exposure to one specific foodborne pathogen, *Salmonella* (the leading cause of foodborne illness).

The Meat and Poultry Hotline handled approximately 130 calls about the final rule. More than half the calls were from businesses seeking sources of further information. Consumers who asked about the final rule wanted to know if they could expect immediate improvements in the safety or quality of products.

The number of Hotline calls on this issue was considered significant, since normally there are few questions regarding the procedural aspects of meat and poultry inspection.

Power Failures and Floods Jeopardize Food Safety

Fifteen hundred consumers spoke to a Hotline food safety specialist about keeping foods safe after a power outage. Power failure advice was also a frequent choice of after-hours callers who listened to recorded food safety messages. During weather emergencies, some consumers were without electricity for hours, even days, and were very concerned about preserving the food in their refrigerators and freezers. While there were disastrous events that precipitated power-out calls, such as the "Blizzard of '96" in January and Hurricane Fran in September, these types of calls were evenly distributed throughout the year.

Storage and Preparation of Fresh Turkey

As food processing technology evolves, consumers are encountering food handling advice that differs from the traditional wisdom, or from their time-honored family recipes. A major issue during the 1996 holiday season was whether stuffing a turkey is advisable given that today's turkeys are broader-breasted—and today's consumers want the shortest possible cooking times. In November alone, at least 10 percent of consumers calling about turkey asked about stuffing. An estimated 400 stuffing questions were handled over the course of the year.

FSIS now recommends that stuffing be cooked outside the bird for uniform results. Because a thermometer should be used to insure that the stuffing, as well as the turkey, reaches a safe internal temperature, stuffing should be cooked separately any time a meat thermometer is not available.

Another aspect of turkey preparation that gained attention, accounting for an estimated 450 calls, was refrigerator storage. Callers asked how long a fresh turkey could be stored in the home refrigerator without spoiling. FSIS recommends storing raw poultry in a 40-degree refrigerator only 1 to 2 days. However, some turkey processors are using sell-by dating that indicates a shelf life of several weeks, and they have guaranteed the freshness of the turkey in a home refrigerator through the package date. The Hotline will continue to track calls related to poultry product dating.

Egg Safety

Many of approximately 1,000 inquiries about egg handling and preparation arose from a concern about *Salmonella enteritidis*. While egg safety is not a new issue for the Meat and Poultry Hotline, regulatory activity generated some new questions. In 1996, FSIS and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a joint Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the transportation and storage of potentially hazardous foods, which includes eggs. Subsequent media reports focused public attention on the difficulty of keeping eggs at an ideal temperature during transportation and sale. Callers who reacted to these media reports asked about practices in retail stores, but they were mainly concerned about whether their own cooking and handling practices offered sufficient protection against *Salmonella enteritidis*.

Cutting Boards

The kitchen cutting board, frequently used to illustrate the concept of cross-contamination, has emerged in the last few years as a subject of some controversy. In 1994, scientific research reopened the "wooden versus plastic" debate. Since then, the Meat and Poultry Hotline has seen an increase in cutting board questions. Approximately 190 cutting board calls were recorded in 1996. A significant portion (28 percent) of these calls involved a new "anti-microbial" cutting board. The manufacturer claimed the plastic board would prevent the growth of commonly-occurring pathogens. Consumers, assuming that this product would eliminate or reduce certain hazards, were quick to call the Hotline

for more information. [Note: On July 1, 1997, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ordered the company to stop selling these products. Any company intending to sell a product with pesticidal claims must prove that the product meets the claims as stated on the label; the required data had not been submitted to the EPA.]

Summary of Accomplishments

Each year, the Meat and Poultry Hotline assists many thousands of consumers personally. By responding to media calls—732 in 1996—the Hotline is able to reach a much wider audience. An active outreach program ensures that the information individuals glean from their calls also reaches "multipliers," who in turn inform many others about the Hotline. These are some of the ways food safety information was disseminated.

- *Radio Interview Campaigns and In-person Interviews for Radio and Television.* Flyers sent to radio news directors resulted in 111 interviews—live, taped and call-in (46 near Easter/Passover; 65 prior to Thanksgiving). Also, the Hotline supervisor was a regular guest on USDA radio. Television appearances included the Cable News Network.
- *News Features.* Nine seasonal features were released over the news wires and through USDA's press services.
- *Video News Releases (VNR).* These were transmitted via satellite; hard copies were sent to media outlets and educators upon request. One VNR demonstrated and encouraged meat thermometer use; others reflected seasonal food safety concerns.
- *Internet.* Fact sheets and other printed publications produced by the Hotline were made available on the World Wide Web. The Meat and Poultry Hotline number was included on many of FSIS' web pages as a source of additional information.
- *Information Kits for Food and Health Editors.* Packets were mailed quarterly with three or four new "Food Safety Focus" or "Food Safety Feature" titles. These were distributed to 200 magazines and 1,500 newspapers, and a number of consumer affairs professionals.
- *Congressional Newsletters.* The first in a planned series of mailings to Members of Congress included food safety tips as camera-ready copy suitable for use in the Members' constituent newsletters.

- *New Publications.* A series of "Consumer Information from USDA" fact sheets presented information in an easily reproducible, 8 1/2 x 11 format.
- *Participation in Professional Meetings and Conferences.* Hotline staff developed presentations for several local groups, and went to the national meetings of the American Dietetic Association (ADA) and American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. A poster was presented at the ADA poster session. Hotline staff also participated in briefings for many visitors to the Department of Agriculture.
- *Technical Support.* Hotline staff assisted other organizations in the development of food safety materials, including a video for consumers on safe food handling produced by FDA.

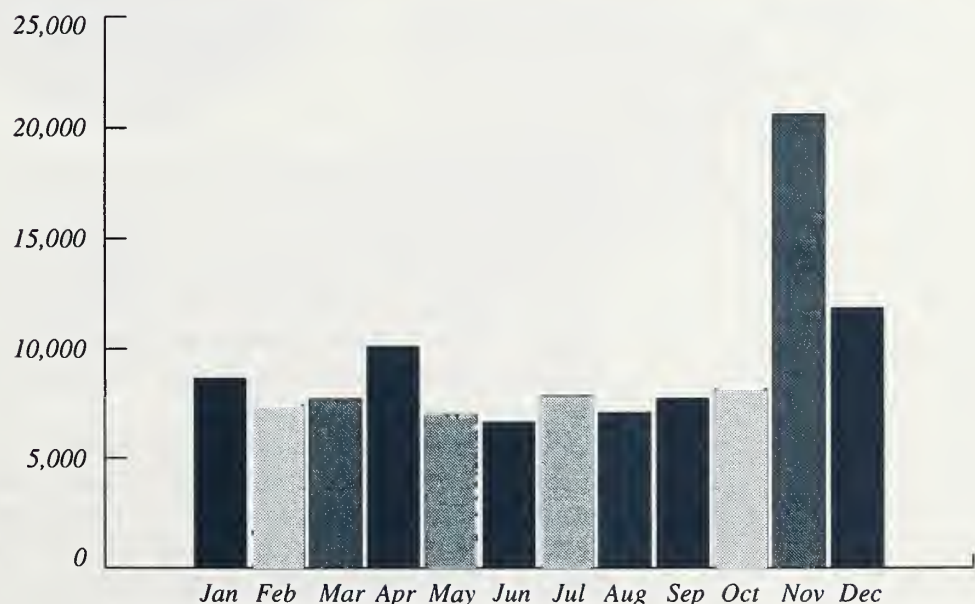
Facts and Figures

Call Volume

A grand total of 110,660 calls were received by the Meat and Poultry Hotline between January 1 and December 31, 1996.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 1996's calls by month. As usual, November and December—with respectively 19 and 11 percent of the year's calls—were the busiest months.

Figure 1: Call Volume 1996

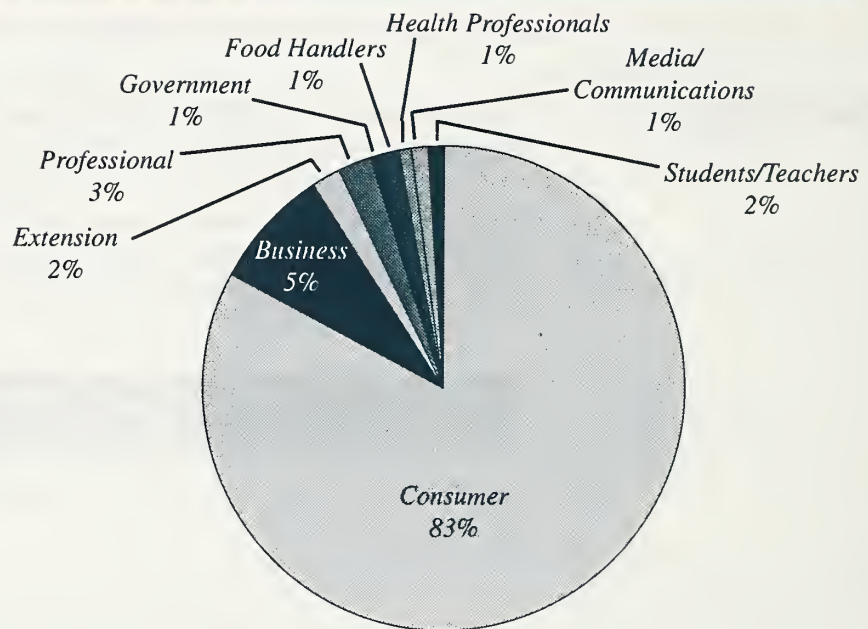


Because not all callers use the Hotline during business hours (when lines are staffed), the number of consumers who spoke to a food safety specialist—and had their concerns documented—is less than the total number of calls. The remaining statistics in this report are based on records of 38,818 calls where a consumer spoke to a food safety specialist; these calls comprised 40,946 inquiries. (One person's "call" may include several distinct "inquiries" on different topics.) On average, food safety specialists spoke with 160 callers each business day. The highest one-day total, reached in late November, was 515.

Hotline Callers

Eighty-three percent of callers to the Meat and Poultry Hotline were consumers. Seventeen percent of callers identified themselves as part of a specialized audience (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Hotline Callers 1996



The Hotline's business and professional clients included: educators, communicators, meat purveyors, government officials, foodservice workers, health and human service professionals (registered dietitians, physicians, home economists, etc.), students, and teachers. These callers, especially the media callers whose audiences can number in the millions, help the Meat and Poultry Hotline reach a multitude of consumers in addition to those who call to ask questions.

Some media callers contacted the Hotline manager directly rather than by calling the Hotline. These calls were not considered in the calculations for figure 2, so the actual percentage of media calls is slightly higher than the graphic indicates. The final count for 1996 showed 732 media/information multiplier calls. Calls came from newspapers (189), magazines (156), radio stations (128), television stations (72), newsletters (28), and various other organizations (159).

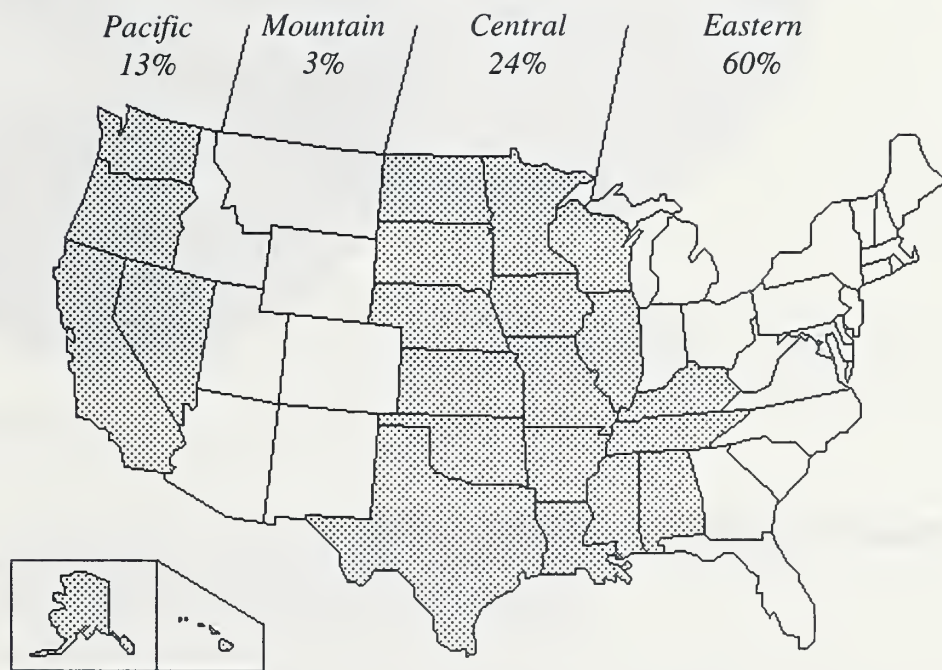
Callers' Home States

As a centralized data collection point, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is able to sample opinion and compare questions from around the country. Although the distribution of calls varies by region, calls were received from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries. In 1996, the Eastern United States (these regions being roughly equivalent to time zones) produced 60 percent of calls; the Central region, 24 percent; the Mountain region, 3 percent; and the Pacific region, 13 percent.

As in 1995, two-thirds of the calls originated in 1 of 12 geographically scattered states. They were, in descending order: New York, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois, Texas, Michigan, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Virginia.

There were 31 calls from outside the United States (at least 10 different countries).

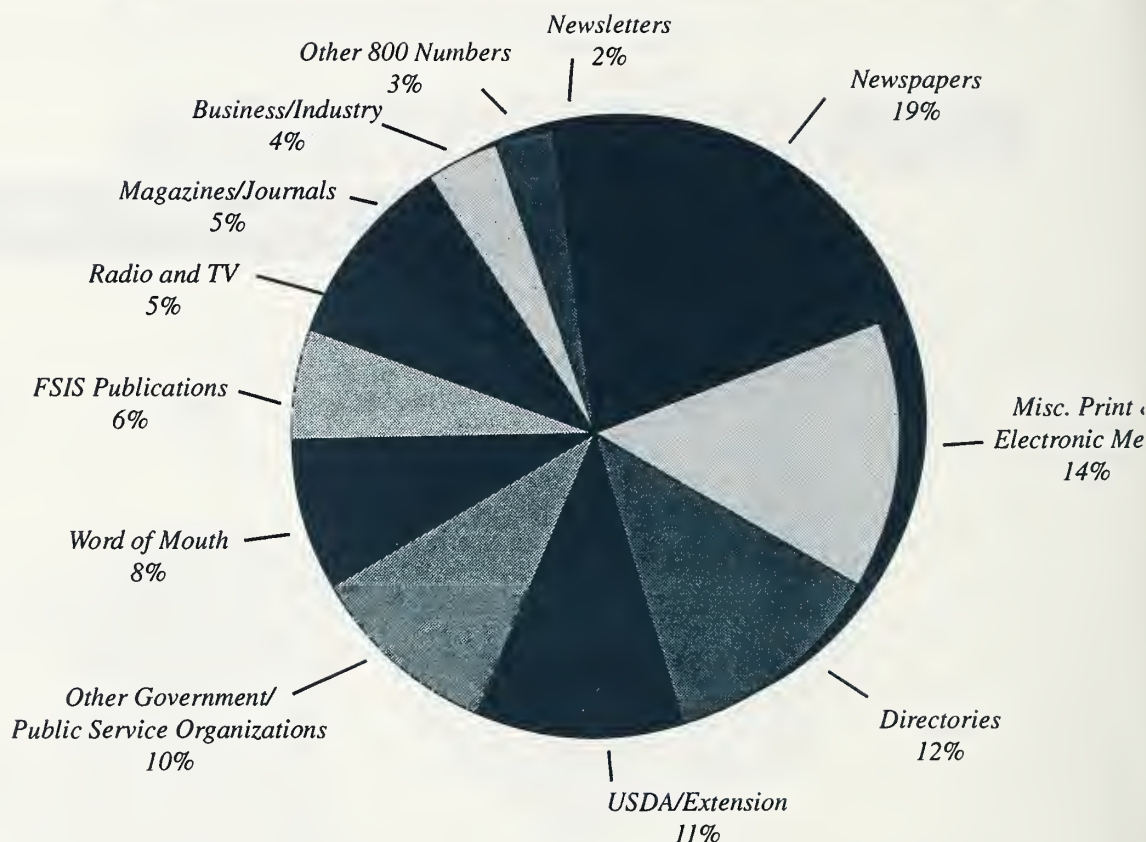
Figure 3: Hotline Callers' Home States 1996



How Callers Learned of the Hotline

Thirty-four percent of Hotline customers were repeat callers. Those using the service for the first time (66 percent) were asked how they obtained the telephone number (see figure 4). Most often, the number was obtained through print media. The specific sources mentioned most often were: newspapers (19 percent of first-time callers); miscellaneous publications—cookbooks in particular (14 percent); directories (12 percent); and USDA agencies/Cooperative Extension System (11 percent).

Figure 4: Subjects of Inquiry, 1996



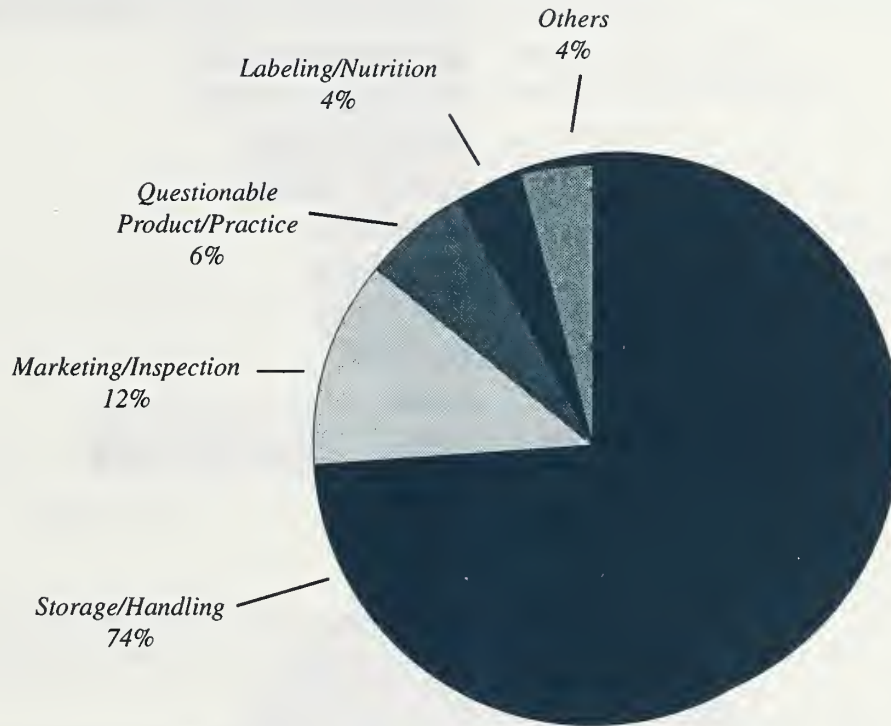
Types of Inquiries

In 1996, less than 2 percent of customer contacts were characterized as complaints. (Each inquiry, regardless of its subject, is designated either an information request or a complaint.) Complaints were varied and involved food products, government policies, and industry practices.

Complaints were further classified as formal or informal, depending on whether further Agency action was dictated. Informal complaints, those of a general nature referring to some condition in the marketplace, outnumbered formal, Agency-investigated complaints by more than 3 to 1 (504 to 150). Allegations of foreign objects were most frequent in the formal complaint category and alleged illnesses/injuries ranked

second. Reports of alleged foreign objects were also most common among the informal complaints, followed by complaints about the practices of a store or foodservice establishment.

Figure 5: Subjects of Inquiry, 1996



Subject of Inquiry. Most Hotline inquiries are about safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat and poultry products, as figures 5 and 6 illustrate. These storage/handling/preparation questions, together with publication requests and general questions about foodborne illness, accounted for 74 percent of all inquiries in 1996.

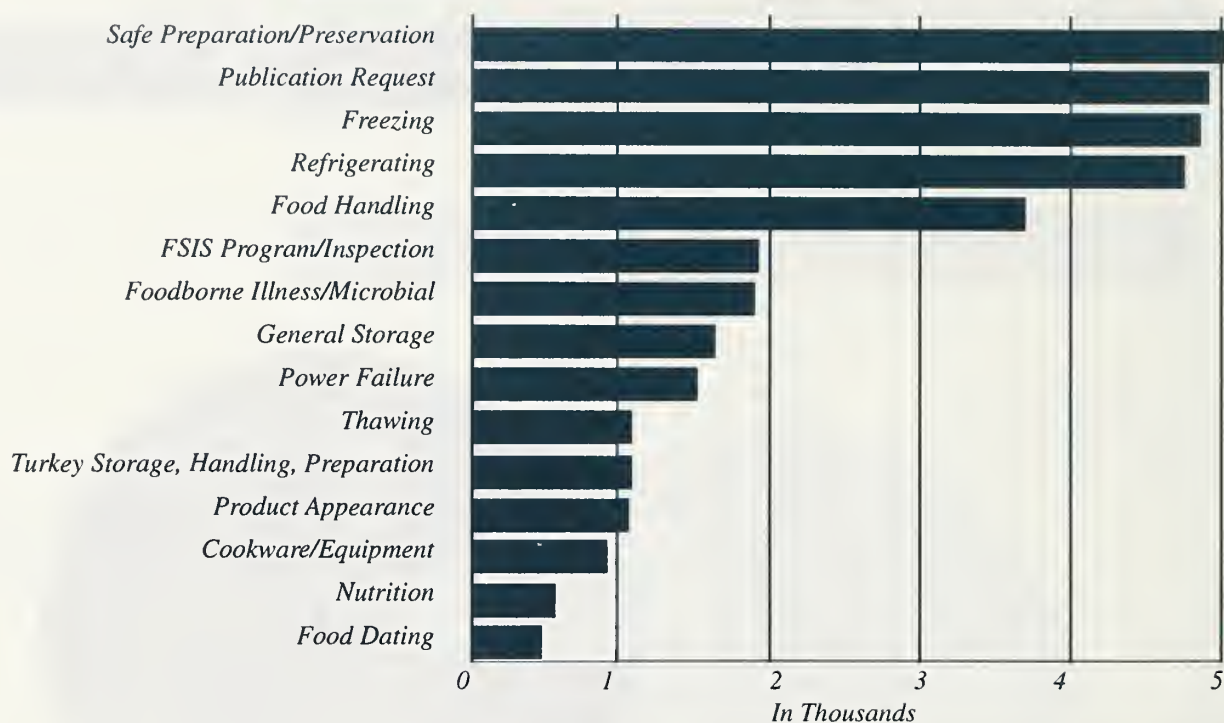
Twelve percent of inquiries dealt with marketing and inspection issues. Callers asked safety-related food buying questions; packaging, cookware and equipment questions; and questions on various regulatory issues (product formulation, recalls, meat and poultry inspection, agricultural chemical use, food biotechnology, food additives, etc.). Six percent of inquiries were grouped under the heading of questionable products and practices: products in suspect or off condition; practices in stores, restaurants and food service establishments.

Four percent of inquiries pertained to labeling, product dating, or basic nutrition.

The remaining 4 percent involved other issues and included referrals for questions outside the Hotline mission area.

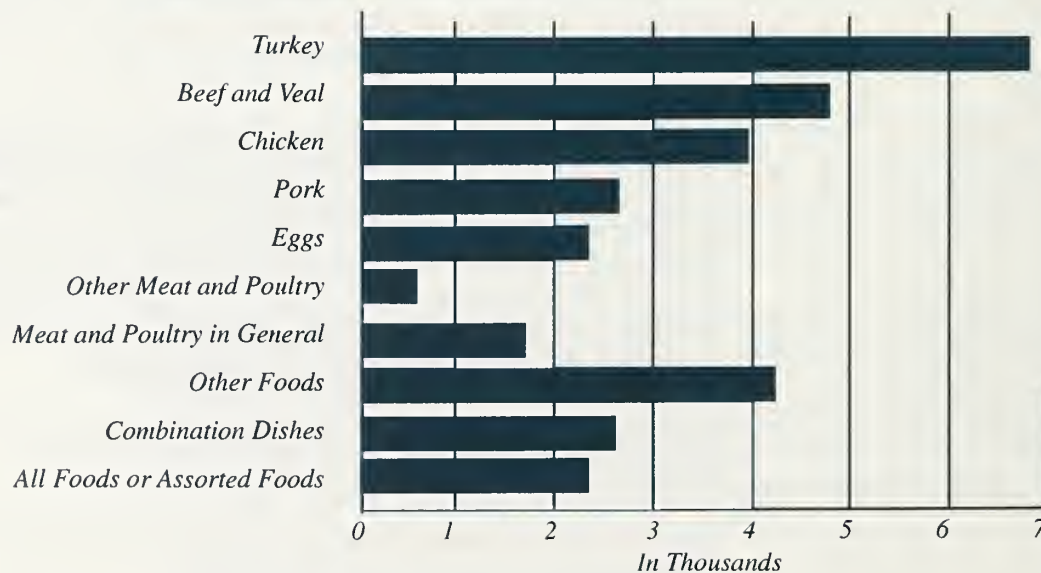
The top 15 subjects of inquiry for the year are shown in figure 6.

Figure 6: Common Subjects of Inquiry, 1996



Inquiries by Food Group. Figure 7 looks at calls specifically associated with a food or class of product. Seventy-seven percent of inquiries were product-specific.

Figure 7: Meat and Poultry Inquiries by Food Group, 1996

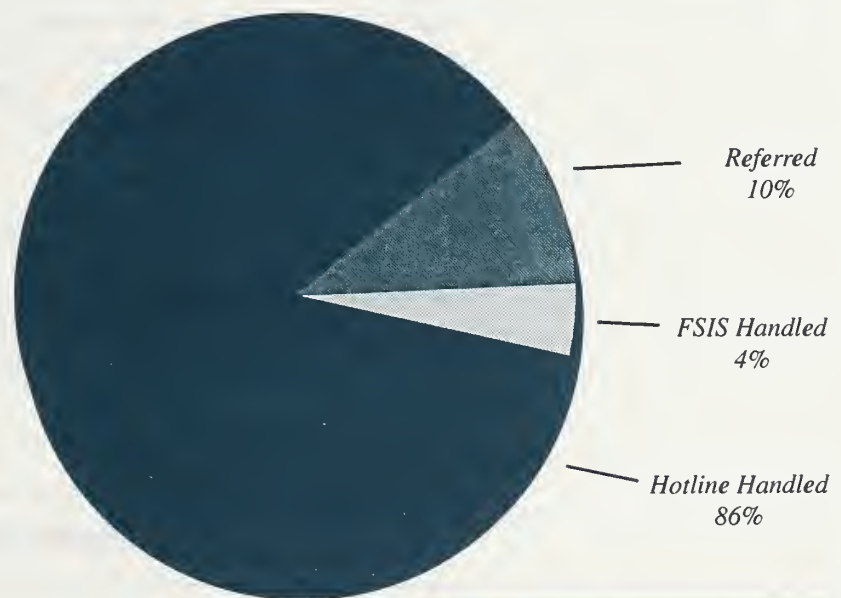


The five major product groups, which accounted for 63 percent of product-specific questions, were turkey, beef/veal, chicken, pork, and eggs. Questions varied seasonally; for example, turkey calls prevailed in November and December; pork and egg questions increased in the Spring; chicken and beef calls predominated in the summer months when outdoor cooking is popular.

Out of necessity, the Hotline does address questions on products other than meat and poultry. The principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, and generally other foods are prepared alongside meat and poultry dishes. Questions about other products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary. Most often, the responsible agency is the FDA or a local health department.

Call Management. Hotline information specialists maintain contact with experts in FSIS and many other agencies in order to provide the best, most current information to consumers. As a result, most inquiries (86 percent) were resolved on the first contact. Four percent of inquiries were referred to another arm of FSIS; the remaining 10 percent were referred to other agencies.

Figure 8: Call Handling, 1996



Breakdown of Referred Calls

<i>FDA</i>	<i>2%</i>
<i>Health Departments</i>	<i>1%</i>
<i>Extension</i>	<i>1%</i>
<i>Trade Associations</i>	<i>1%</i>
<i>Other USDA Agencies</i>	<i>2%</i>
<i>Misc. Government</i>	<i>1%</i>
<i>Other</i>	<i>1%</i>

Usually, referrals were made to one of five places: FDA (which regulates food products other than meat and poultry); other agencies within the U.S. Department of Agriculture; state or local health departments (which regulate grocery stores and restaurants); Cooperative Extension (a grass-roots educational program co-sponsored by USDA and each state's land grant university), or industry trade associations. See figure 8.

In addition to answering consumer calls, the Hotline staff assumes many responsibilities in support of FSIS' overall educational program. For example, each staff member served as subject-matter expert on specific topics. This responsibility entailed conducting research, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing alliances with experts across the country, and developing consumer materials and internal reference materials. As a result of these efforts, Hotline specialists were often asked to consult with other offices, agencies, and organizations on their consumer education projects.

The Hotline developed its own training materials and scheduled in-service workshops as necessary. Staff educated and informed interested parties, in addition to Hotline callers, by giving speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

For most of 1996, the Meat and Poultry Hotline staff consisted of the Director, a Public Affairs Specialist, a Management Analyst, a Supervisory Technical Information Specialist, six part-time and four intermittent Technical Information Specialists, and a Secretary. As part of an Agency reorganization in November, one part-time Technical Information Specialist and the Management Analyst were assigned to other branches within FSIS' Food Safety Education and Communications Staff.

Members of the Hotline team bring a variety of work and educational experiences to their jobs. The staff includes nutrition and home economics teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, consumer advisors, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, food journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.

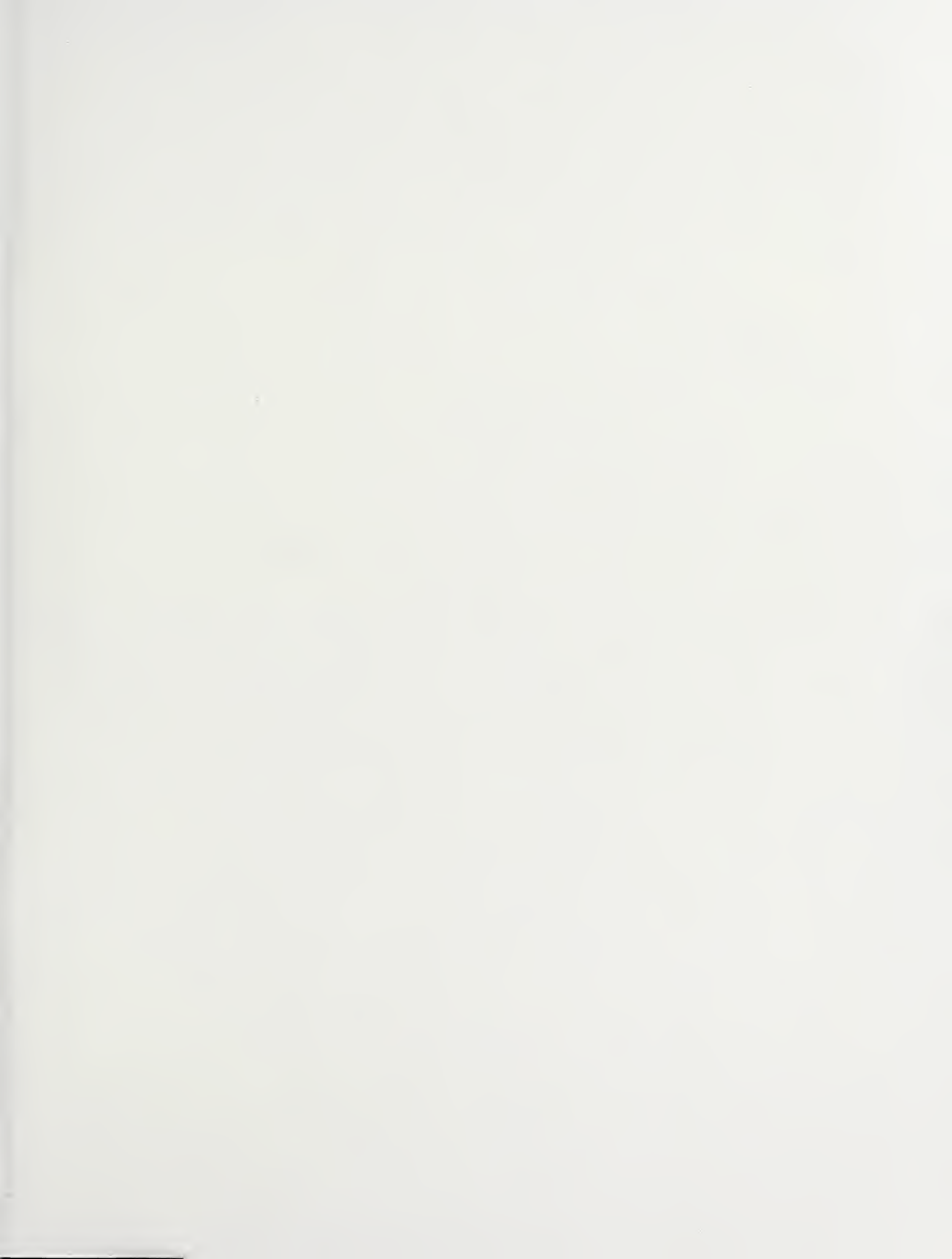
For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling:

1-800-535-4555 (voice)
202-720-3333 (Washington, D.C., area), or
1-800-256-7072 (TDD/TTY, beginning September 1997).

Callers may speak with a food safety specialist from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, weekdays. Recorded messages are available at all times.





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